

Through the glass doors of a two-story ranch house, I recently watched rain wash the cow jungle of South Texas. Four days of floods and floodgates had opened an intermission in one of the area's worst drouths. On the way down from the Shortgrass country, I saw creeks out of their banks and heard reports of rainfall reaching 18 inches on the Mexican border. Porches on the store fronts of the small towns were lined by citizens gloating in what was the latest spring most of them had ever experience. Surly gasoline grinders who hadn't broken a smile in years were grinning. New life and new hope had definitely hit the cow jungle.

My host has received 6½ inches of rain. His country is already responding to the moisture. Crocuses have popped from the earth; grass that was thought lost has started upwards. Though half his cattle are being boarded at feedlots, the rest are at work mending up from the dry holocaust. By far, this general disposition has shown the most rapid improvement. Given proper handling, he should be fully recovered by 1976.

Be patient and I'll tell you what this country is like. The guajillo brush, the black brush, in fact all the brush except white brush has thorns. Like the Shortgrass Country, the grass is sparse but very strong and very drouth resistant. No area suffers for lack of adequate shade. If all the trees and shrubbery in the cow jungle were distributed across the state of Texas, there'd be enough left over to build a hedge around the state of New Mexico. I found a natural clearing this morning that was 50 feet square. The spot was such a phenomenon that a trail had been beaten to the place by people coming to see the attraction.

Cattle and herders are super wild in this country. Both species are easy to spook on open ground. Were either the men or the cows brutes turned loose in the plateaus of the Shortgrass Country, they'd tear down the fences hunting for cover. Our densest brush could be used for a golf course down here.

Rattlesnakes, as I mentioned after a previous visit, are what I'd label as the mammoth diamond back. I can't verify exactly how big they grow. Each year, my partner's story telling ability enlarges, making it impossible to judge whether his verbal skill is adding to the size of the snakes or whether the snakes are growing larger. Since my duties as reporter do not involve measuring reptiles, I am not going to give a full report on the size of South Texas rattlers. Nevertheless, I will say the people frightened by lawn and garden snakelets should avoid these parts. The cow jungle is no place to get over snake phobia.

The most vicious predator found in the brushlands receives no publicity. It's a small seed tick that feasts on the blood of the wild cattle and wild men who range here. My compadre says that one of these ticks will climb up a mesquite tree and wait as long as 20 years to pounce upon a rider. He also claims these ticks are a bane to the beehives that he keeps on the ranch in the spring. (Beekeeping is a commercial venture in South Texas. Excellent honey is made from the flowers on the brush.) The seed ticks, after years of drinking from the two different bloodstreams, human and bovine, will without provocation attack the largest strains of honey bee. The stud tick, he says, can whip the bull bumble bee so badly that it isn't unusual to see an old bee with his wings and landing gear torn up worse than a stewardess' hair after a skyjacking episode. On a Sunday's outing, a half grown tick is apt to kick a full grown bee's stinger clear up between his shoulder blades. The bees are so frightened of the ticks that humless colonies are common. I didn't think I'd ever live to see a swarm of bumble bees that were cowards, but you'd better believe that these South Texas bees will starve for pollen before they'll chance meeting one of these seed ticks.

Big rains have ended at this writing. Only small grey columns of thunder showers are whispering across the rangelands. Frank Dobie was enthralled by the brush country. After two visits, I understand Dobie's infatuation. The land and the people are as tough as the ticks and the cattle. Their toughness (I speak of the people and the land; I am not and never will be a tick or cow lover) can only be surpassed by their high quality. Next to the Shortgrass country I love this place better than anywhere I've ever been.